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Pentagon Annual Says Soviets Able To Deploy Blinding Laser Weapons

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The Pentagon said yesterday that the Soviet Union has developed and "could soon" deploy laser weapons that could blind soldiers.

The warning was contained in the Defense Department's 1987 edition of "Soviet Military Power," a 159-page magazine describing Moscow's military effort. Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger said the report documents how the Soviets are building "far beyond legitimate requirements for defense."

"The tactical laser program has progressed to where battlefield laser weapons could soon be deployed with Soviet forces," the report said. "The Soviets have the technological capability to deploy low-power laser weapons—at least for antipersonnel use and against soft targets."

Although the report did not elaborate, military officials said that Soviet progress with battlefield lasers has generated U.S. military planning sessions on how to deal with the alleged threat of eye warfare. One countermeasure under consideration, sources said, would involve sending soldiers into battle with a patch over one eye so they would not be completely blinded by a surge of light.

"The morale problems from battlefield lasers are horrendous," said one source familiar with the briefings. "There is a feeling among some of us that that we have not faced up to this threat even though it's here."

Weinberger, in a news conference on the sixth annual edition of "Soviet Military Power," said the Soviets have employed lasers in Afghanistan, but defense officials said he was not referring to the lasers designed to blind troops or air crews. Instead, he was alluding to portable lasers employed to find the range of aircraft or ground targets, the officials said.

The report said these range-finding lasers have been used on Western planes and ships and "could have caused serious eye damage to observers." Pentagon officials who briefed reporters said some personnel—although no Americans—have been blinded temporarily by those Soviet lasers, one of which the report depicts on a Soviet destroyer.

The Pentagon briefers, who declined to be identified by name or title, said the Soviet military budget has been growing by a steady 3 percent for the past "five or six years," a figure agreed upon by the Central Intelligence Agency and Defense Intelligence Agency.

This edition of "Soviet Military Power," which the Pentagon said

cost \$330,000 for 330,010 copies, made these other findings:

- The Soviet Union is devoting 15 to 17 percent of its gross national product to defense, compared with 6 percent for the United States. The Soviet economy is considerably smaller than that of the United States.

- The Soviets continue to modernize missile defenses, with one new development—the Gazelle ground-based intercept missile.

- The huge SS18 intercontinental ballistic missile, which carries 10 warheads, is being improved but none of the test firings of the new version has been successful.

- The SS19 Mod 3 ICBM, which the Pentagon last year portrayed as having similar capabilities to the silo-busting SS18, "has significant capability against all but hardened silos." This represents a downgrading of that missile's accuracy.

- The 65,000-ton Leonid Brezhnev aircraft carrier is expected to undergo sea trials in 1989. The report said the Soviets are testing both catapults and "ski-jump" ramps for launching aircraft from the carrier.

- The Soviets from 1977 to 1986 built 3,000 land- and sea-based intercontinental missiles compared with the United States' 850. The comparative count for tanks in that decade was: Soviet Union, 24,400; United States, 7,100.